

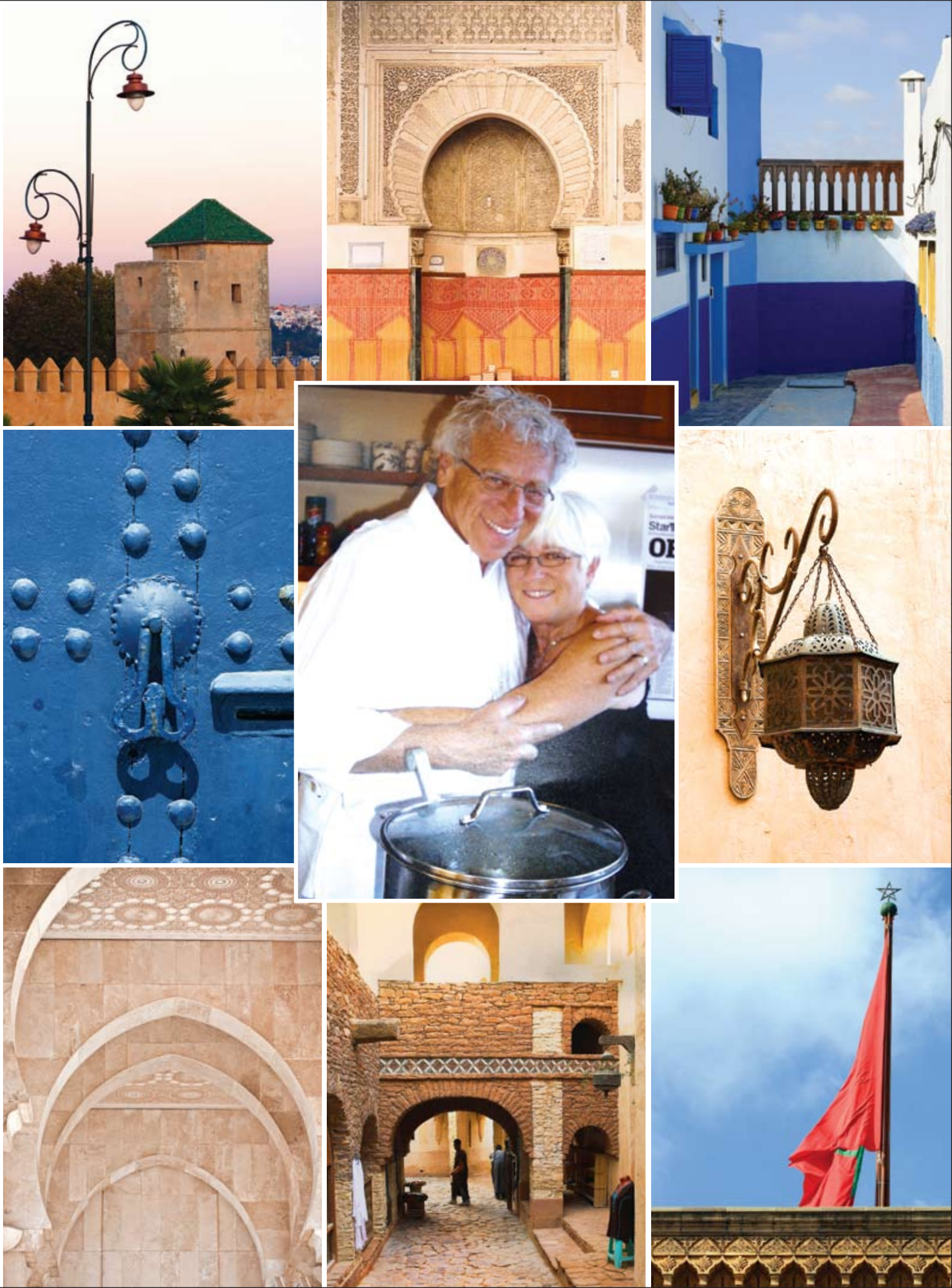
Attorney **SAM KAPLAN** and wife **SYLVIA** spent years in the local spotlight wielding serious influence in political circles and the restaurant biz and as a dynamic duo on charitable boards. Now they are serving their country—Sam is President Obama’s ambassador to Morocco. Friend and writer **MERLE MINDA** parts the curtain on their new life in the cradle of civilization.



# THE KAPLANS TAKE MOROCCO

A GLIMPSE INSIDE THE HIGH WALLS OF AMBASSADORIAL LIFE

VILLA AMERICA DOOR PHOTO BY MERLE MINDA; MOROCCO PHOTOS FROM SHUTTERSTOCK (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): POSZTOS, DP PHOTOGRAPHY, AMSKAD, DHDXAX, ANA DEL CASTILLO, DHDXAX, JAVIER MARTIN, VLADIMIR WRANGEL, SAM AND SYLVIA KAPLAN PHOTO BY DIPLOMATIC/DR







**M**inneapolisans Sam and Sylvia Kaplan left for Morocco in the fall of 2009 for a three-year adventure of a lifetime. A prominent Twin Cities attorney, Sam had been appointed America's ambassador to Morocco by President Obama. The couple has been a dynamic duo in DFL political circles for years, playing important roles in the elections of many Minnesota officials, including Paul Wellstone, Amy Klobuchar, R.T. Rybak, and Keith Ellison. Relatively early to the Obama bandwagon, the Kaplans were extremely effective at generating capital for the campaign. Some recall presidential fundraisers at their Mississippi riverfront home featuring entertainment industry heavyweights such as Bette Midler and Larry David. Even so, when the couple was notified of the appointment, they were stunned. Knowing the Kaplans as good friends for many years, I wasn't surprised.

Since the appointment, there has been an ongoing parade of visitors to Villa America, their residence in Rabat, Morocco's capital. The couple has welcomed Senator Klobuchar and husband John Bessler, Congressman Ellison, former state Senator George Pillsbury and wife Sally, and Mayor Rybak and wife Megan O'Hara as guests. When Sylvia invited my



husband, Roland, and me to visit, as she did numerous other close friends, we decided to make our way to Morocco last fall. Here are some of the pages from our travel diary:

◆ **WE GET OUR** first impressions of Sam and Sylvia Kaplan's life-style as we're dropped off at their residence, Villa America, the afternoon of our first day in Morocco. Roland and I are greeted by Nisrine, the house manager, and before long, Sylvia appears, having just walked back to the villa from a nearby hairdresser. She looks just the same as she would on any warm Minneapolis afternoon—in linen pedal pushers and flip-flops.

After a tour of the house, we repair to the terrace to chat. When Sam arrives, we partake of Morocco's typical mint tea, served traditionally from a small silver teapot. A plate of Sylvia's trademark fudge appears, and we devour it.

Villa America has a staff of eight, including Nisrine, a chef, two maids, two gardeners, a sentry outside, and Kamel, a sort of indispensable butler-houseman. The house itself is really a small villa—not grand exactly, but handsome and spacious. The main floor includes a large foyer, several reception/living rooms, a dining room that seats about 30, a kitchen, and the Pasha Suite, where we are comfortably ensconced, which includes a bedroom, bathroom, and sitting room. Upstairs, Sam



Photos at far left: Sen. Amy Klobuchar, President Obama, the Kaplans, and Sen. Al Franken; Merle and Roland Minda. Adjacent photos, clockwise from left: Shaking hands with Morocco's King Mohammed IV; Villa America's pool patio, living room, and kitchen.



and Sylvia have several rooms, including a private sitting room and Sylvia's office, which serves as Grand Central for running the house and coordinating her many activities, receptions, and visitors. Several guest bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms are upstairs as well. The

dining room opens onto an outdoor flagstone terrace, garden, and large pool. Sylvia proudly shows me the garden in which she grew a much-reported-on crop of Minnesota sweet corn. "Moroccans don't have a tradition of eating corn on the cob," she says, "so I just grew it." Two large pumpkins rest in a reception room bowl (we arrived just after Halloween). Sylvia grew them as well.

Sam and Sylvia are perhaps most notable in Morocco because they don't color their hair as almost everyone in the Arab world does (men as well as women). Sam's trimmed gray locks and Sylvia's snow-white bob stand out in a sea of black.

Both Kaplans emphasize that they approach the job together. Sam speaks at events and meetings, and Sylvia comes along, sizing up the interests of the audience and then speaking casually and off the cuff. When Sam officially presented his ambassadorial credentials to King

SAM AND SYLVIA KAPLAN PHOTO BY DIPLOMATIC/DR

Mohammed VI of Morocco, Sylvia was introduced and shook hands with the king, a first for any such ambassadorial event in Morocco. There is a photo of this moment in a place of honor among many political and family photos on the grand piano in Villa America's foyer.

"I wish I had done this kind of work much earlier in my career," Sam says.



◆ **A DIPLOMATIC DINNER** will take place during our first evening, so Roland and I head to our suite to get gussied up. The guests arrive early for cocktails, greeted by Sylvia, who is wearing a traditional Moroccan *jalaba*. There are 24 for dinner, and the evening is dedicated to tourism with a group of high-powered U.S. travel agents, the president of Abercrombie & Kent Worldwide, and, in a social coup, the king's young, newly appointed minister of tourism and handicrafts and his stunning wife.

These guests are new to the Villa, and they are particularly interested in the paintings that fill the walls. On loan from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society and the Minnesota Museum of Art, these works are another example of how mindfully the Kaplans approach their roles: The focus of the art, as Sylvia says, is on WPA artists between the wars "to show people here that government can do good things even when times are tough."

The dinner is a success, with much of the food cooked by Sylvia, including a first course of bean and barley soup with wild mushrooms, followed by a giant paella also prepared by Sylvia, in concert with the chef. If you are surprised that the ambassador's wife cooks for dinner parties, so was Villa America's staff. Sylvia is well known at home as an original and



Villa America's entry foyer with grand staircase and chandelier, but also filled with photos, typifies the homey elegance of the residence.

PHOTO BY MIKE ROSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

almost legendary chef, able to toss off a dinner for 300 at the drop of a hat. Penetrating the kitchen here, though, required some diplomacy. "Madame wants to cook?" she recalls the chef asking, puzzled. (The house staff call her "Madame.") But now, after more than a year together, an easy peace has ensued, and he welcomes her presence.

After dinner, her famous fudge is shared with the guests. The event is marked by generous speeches, welcomes, and toasts. Sam is in his element. The speeches are topped by the king's minister of tourism, Yassir Zenagui, who rises to personally thank the Kaplans for the energy and commitment they have brought to their roles.



◆ **THE NEXT MORNING**, through a decoratively barred window, one can't miss the distant wail of the muezzin, calling the faithful to morning prayer. We join the Kaplans for their traditional 7:30 AM breakfast. At home, the couple is known for this daily ritual, first at the



## 5 THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT SAM AND SYLVIA KAPLAN

**1** Both were raised in the Twin Cities—Sylvia is 72 and Sam is 74. Married 36 years, they have six children and 13 grandchildren.

**2** Sylvia has two master's degrees and was once a reporter for the *Golden Valley Sun*.

**3** Together they served on President Obama's 2008 National Finance Committee.

**4** Almost inseparable, the couple break-fast together daily and share lunch every day Sam's schedule permits.

**5** Sylvia was co-founder of the New French Cafe and remains sole owner of Bar Abilene.

THE KAPLANS WITH PRESIDENT OBAMA/SENATORS AND SAM WITH KING MOHAMMED IV. PHOTOS BY DIPLOMATIC/DR; KITCHEN AND LIVING ROOM PHOTOS BY MIKE ROSEN PHOTOGRAPHY; PATIO PHOTO BY MERLE MINDA



# MOROCCO IN A YEAR OF MIDEAST TURMOIL

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy and the most westernized country in North Africa, but it is not quite European, lacking the electoral freedoms or high standard of living common to the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

Sam manages a U.S. embassy staff of about 400, including a military contingent. Sam is stimulated by the job, saying it has really two parts—representing the United States to the people of Morocco by manifesting U.S. culture and friendliness, and the diplomatic role with its inherent challenges and unanticipated problems.

The most notable of those has been the civil unrest that has overtaken much of the Middle East since February. Morocco has not been immune from this, but to date the protests there, as reported by international media, have been rather small. They have been focused on improving standards of living for the unemployed (Morocco's unemployment rate is surprisingly close to that of the United States) and on freedoms that would create a sense of self-determination for the country's professional class. The monarchy, under the young King Mohammed VI, is universally acknowledged to have liberalized the country, and its existence or legitimacy has not been a focus of the Morocco protests.

Our personal observation, having spent two weeks in Morocco, is that the Moroccans we spoke with anticipate the country moving toward increasing democratization and citizen participation. Both Sam and Sylvia say they feel completely safe in Morocco and believe the country remains stable.

New French Cafe (where Sylvia was an owner) and later at the Minneapolis Club. Here we convene poolside, give our orders to Kamel, and eat off gold-rimmed white china embossed with the gold eagle of the United States of America.

After breakfast Sam leaves for the embassy; he makes the short walk to his office a few blocks away, trailed by a retinue of security guards. Sylvia, Roland, and I also walk up the hill to the embassy, passing several other embassies along the route.

We join up with a familiarization tour designed for new diplomatic workers and spouses to show them where and



PHOTOS BY DIPLOMATIC/DR

From top: The Kaplans have hosted a plethora of Minnesota VIPs: the Rybak family—son Charlie, mom Megan, daughter Grace, and R.T.—as well as Rep. Keith Ellison.

a truck. Our entire cortege stops so she can make her choices. “I found celery!” she enthuses.

That evening, we dine at Villa America with two American students studying in Rabat, plus Jim Miller, the director of the Moroccan Fulbright program, who turns out to have a fascinating knowledge of African history and culture.



◆ IN THE MORNING, after another breakfast together, Salah—the driver recommended by Sylvia who drives many of her guests—picks us up and we make our final farewells. For the next two weeks we will see more of Morocco, including ninth-century Fez, spectacular Marrakech, the Atlantic Coast, and the Atlas Mountains.

The Kaplans have traveled quite a bit as well, attending events throughout the country—film festivals, music fests, seminars, and meetings—and they always appear together. They offer us suggestions for restaurants to look for in each city. As we soon discover, if we mention having been referred by them, a flurry ensues. This happens often because Salah has a tendency to announce our connection to them wherever we go.

“Ah yes, Ambassador and Madame Kaplan sat at this table—here is what they ordered and here is their server. Would you like to sit here too?”

Inevitably, we do. ■